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Chapter 15: What parents know: a call for realistic accounts of parenting young children

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At Clifton Park in Rotherham, there is a fantastic playground including a sand play area. We often go to the sand pit. The children pull off their socks and shoes and play with the sand, and take turns on the fast slide that lands in a pile of sand. We parents sit on the wooden boardwalk next to the sand pit. We take our shoes off too, bury toes or run fingers through the sand as we chat. After a little while, the children will probably come to sit on the wooden boardwalk too, and we will eat our packed lunch. It is a beautiful spot – you can see the hillside of the park rising up behind the sand pit, and the children always seem happy here. It is also a little stressful because it is often quite busy, and we try to keep our eyes on our children as they play and we chat.

Mothers live in a universe that has not been accurately described. The right words have not been coined. Using habitual vocabulary sends us straight down the same old much-trodden paths. But there are other paths to which these footpaths do not lead. There are whole stretches of motherhood that no one has explored.

Stadlen, 2005, p.12

The vignette above typifies the meetings that took place between us, a group of researchers and parents, during collaborative research over a number of years near Clifton Park in Rotherham. As part of our collaborative ethnography, we organised a series of family den building events, with community partners, in order to think through how children learn and

have experiences in places¹. We aimed to explicitly draw across and value different kinds of knowledge about young children; professional practitioner knowledge, academic knowledge, and particularly the knowledges gained from everyday lived experiences of being parents and children. These kinds of everyday knowledges about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of parenting young children are rarely represented or valued in policy discourses, and therefore risk being overlooked in practical initiatives designed to help or support families with young children in communities. By foregrounding and valuing these everyday lived experiences of families and children we hope to offer more realistic accounts of what it means to parent young children, which we think should inform policy and practice regarding how young children should be cared for and participate in communities. In writing this chapter, we hope to contribute answers to the question *how can we reimagine provision for parenting and families with young children in Rotherham through the knowledge that exists in these families and communities?*

The quote at the beginning of this chapter is taken from a book called ‘*What Mothers Do. Especially when it looks like nothing*’ (Stadlen, 2005) and the title of our chapter, ‘What Parents Know’ is a deliberate reference to Stadlen’s work². Whilst the focus of Stadlen’s book is mothers’ early parenting experiences, the way in which she presents nuanced, messy accounts of the emotional work of parenting, drawing mostly on the words of parents themselves, resonates strongly for us. Two key messages run through ‘*What Mothers Do*’; firstly the need to honour the complexity and hard work of mothering, and secondly the importance of what Stadlen calls ‘circles of mothers’, that is, mothers listening to and supporting one another, even when they have made different decisions about parenting. Without the united voices of mothers themselves being represented in debates about child rearing, Stadlen argues, “motherly achievements go unseen” (p.17) and stories remain untold.

¹ We would like to gratefully acknowledge the funding we received for this work through Community Arts Zone, an international research project funded by Canada Social and Humanities Research Council.

² A point of difference between our research and Stadlen’s book is that we are using the term ‘parents’ and she uses the term ‘mothers’. We acknowledge both these terms are problematic. All families are different, and the role different grown ups play in the lives of young children varies greatly. We refer in general in this chapter to the grown ups who are mostly at home with their children, dealing with the daily (and nightly) minutia of caring for young children. In the case of our research team, the term ‘parents’ is appropriate, however in other cases this may be carers, grandparents, siblings etc.

Who are we?

We are a group of parents and researchers, and between the four of us (Tanya, Abi, Jo and Steve), we have over 47 years of parenting experience and over 27 years of research experience. Whilst as a group of four, we cannot begin to claim to represent the diversity of parenting experiences, we do encompass a range of different experiences that may resonate for many parents. Between us, we have had children with close age gaps, juggling babies with small toddlers, and children with large age gaps, doing school run after a night of night feeding; we have experienced pregnancies that took us by surprise and were not planned, and pregnancies that took longer to happen than we would like; we have been stay at home parents, surviving on small incomes, and working parents, struggling with competing demands and guilt; we have raised our children a stone's throw from where we grew up, and on a different continent from where we lived as children. Our children currently range from 23 to 1 years old, and we have personally each spent many hours as parents with our own children at the kinds of family events we organised and studied during this research. Some of us have qualifications in research methods, though for all of us, learning through doing was how we acquired the skills of ethnographic research (as well as our parenting skills).

Abi, Jo and Tanya all had young children at the time of doing the research, and we used the Children's Centres ourselves as parents. Although Steve's children were at school, he had been a stay-at-home dad when they were younger. Therefore, this lived experience of bringing our children to playgroups, family events and Children's Centres as parents ourselves was something the four of us shared. Sometimes our children came with us to the den building events. This chapter is about the interaction between what we know as parents and what we observed as researchers when we investigated young children's learning.

The context of us coming together as a research team is as follows. Abi had already carried out research (including her doctorate) at a local Children's Centre in Rotherham, and Jo and Tanya had participated in her doctoral research. Following her doctorate, Abi had worked with Jo and Tanya on a small project to explore collaborative ethnographic research, during which we all collected visual data about our children's learning (Hackett, 2016). Therefore, the three of us had already begun working together on a collaborative research approach, which we were keen to explore further. Meanwhile, Steve had been involved in a series of

community based research projects in Rotherham, and was invited to work on this project as the project's artist (although in reality our roles were much more blurred).

We organised a series of four family den building events, run over an 8 month period in different community venues in Rotherham: a museum, a multi-use community space, a Children's Centre, a playgroup in a community hall. Each time, the events were run in partnership with community partners (the museum service and the Children's Centre). At each event, Steve led a den building activity for families with children aged under five years, whilst our community partners provided additional activities including craft, dressing up, story-telling and music. At each event, ethnographic fieldnotes and hand held video footage were collected by Abi, Jo or Tanya. As a research team, the four of us also met three times to analyse the data together.

Building dens on the floor and making craft at tables

Crafts – By far the most popular stand of the event. There were crowns, shields and general crafts to be made. All the children, age notwithstanding, made one or more of the items. A lot of the mothers were also engaged in arts and crafts with their children. Girls tended to spend a much longer time with the crafts as well.

Castle – As mentioned above, there was a lot of excitement at first, when the first castle was put up, all the children had a turn running in and out.....The children who had friends/siblings played with them a lot more as they could chase each other through them and play hide and seek.

Fieldnotes, Jo, 28th May

At each event, Steve led a large scale den building activity, in which he used large sheets of card, plastic ties and oil pastels to work with the children to construct dens. Our community partners at each event also organised table based crafts, involving sticking and drawing. As the den building was often conceptualised as a 'castle', the table based crafts also followed a castle theme, including making crowns, shields and swords. Most children took part in both playing in the dens, and in the table based crafts, moving between the two as they wished.

Generally, playing in the dens involved the children running in and out of the structure, through child sized doors, and peeking through child sized windows. They frequently dressed up, wore cardboard crowns, and carried the cardboard swords and shields they had made at the craft table. The children tended to play with each other, and their play was characterised by movement in, around and through the den, whilst parents stayed outside the den. In contrast, the activities at the craft tables, which included decorating crowns, shields and swords with stickers, glitter and feathers, seemed to require sitting at the table. Parents frequently sat on the chairs at the tables too, and assisted their children to copy the sample crowns and swords, by helping them to reach resources, to cut things out and to use the glue sticks. Therefore, in summary, the den building seemed to produce play between children, often involving fast movement, whilst the craft table seemed to produce collaboration between parents and children, which usually involved staying still. The children needed more assistance to make the craft at the table, but also because, when the children were stationary, it was easier for the parents to interact with them.

In order to explore this contrast between how children and families behaved and experienced the craft table compared to the den building area we want to view our observations through different lenses; early years policy context, anthropological critique of that policy context, and our own lived experiences of parenting. In doing so, we bring lived experiences of parenting children into dialogue with the policy context on how parents should be supported or encouraged to parent.

Children's Centres and the early years policy context

In terms of young children's communication, the focus within UK government policy is firmly on spoken communication, increasing the number of words young children choose to use, and on encouraging adults, particularly parents, to spend more time talking one to one, face to face with their children (e.g. Field, 2010; Hart and Risley, 2003; Roulstone et al, 2011). The differential development of language and communication practices in young children from poorer and wealthier households is of great concern to policy makers. However, policy responses tend to adopt a deficit perspective, blaming poor parenting or home environment for the lack of words (e.g. Clarke, 2006; Field, 2010; Hart and Risley, 2003). Research taking a snapshot of 'home environments' has concluded that environment is

a crucial factor in language development (Roulstone et al, 2011), leading to significant investment in recent years in funding younger children to start nursery earlier.

Children's Centres, alongside the majority of early childhood support and intervention initiatives (in the UK at least) also place a strong emphasis on spoken communication (words not gestures) occurring between children and their significant adults, for example, parents. In addition, Children's Centres are tasked with preparing children for starting school, and encouraging families to take up the offer of free nursery hours for their children from the age of 2 years.

Anthropological perspectives on young children's language development

Avineri et al (2015) point out the culturally specific nature of many of the ways in which Western parents are advised by policy makers to communicate with their young children, such as baby talk, and playing peekaboo. Blum (in Avineri et al, 2015) urges a focus on interactions rather than labelling (nouns), in her critique of what she calls 'wordism', that is, the assumption that language is made up of words, and more words are better than fewer words. In addition, she points out

Anthropological research shows, in fact, that addressing the youngest children as conversational partners is extremely unusual in the world. These linguistic exchanges have no communicative function except to reward children with parents' approval for passing the test. Avineri et al, 2015, p.75

Shirley Bryce Heath's (1983) seminal longitudinal ethnography of young children's acquisition of language in two communities in the US provided in depth insights into how language practices (such as storytelling, gossiping and playing) became differently meaningful for children in these two communities in their very early years. Despite the well-established critique in the anthropology (Avineri et al, 2015), sociolinguistics (Snell, 2013) and education studies (Grainger, 2013) literature of the assumptions policy makers have made regarding the nature of young children's communication, parents themselves are rarely

positioned by policy makers as having any expertise with regards to family communication. Rather the emphasis tends to be on what is seen as parents' problematic lack of knowledge about these specific, normative, government sanctioned ways of communicating with young children (e.g. Whitmarsh, 2011).

Policy rhetoric and lived experiences: what is it really like to parent a small child?

Traditions of 'scientific' knowledge about children seeking to influence mothering (in particular) practices have a long history. Opening his book *Essay on Nursing* in 1748, Cadogan wrote

It is with great pleasure I see at last the Preservation of Children become the Care of Men of Sense. In my opinion, this Business has been too long fatally left to the management of Women, who cannot be supposed to have a proper Knowledge to fit them for the Task."

Hardyment, (2007) p.10

Hardyment's book traces a long tradition of scientific knowledge seeking to inform parenting practices, from the 18th century onwards. Whilst the specifics of the advice have varied widely, it is characterised by (both male and female) experts drawing on latest research and theories to influence parents' behaviour, rather than parents relying on others in their communities for guidance. In the last 150 years in particular, this requirement to adopt specific kinds of parenting practices for specific childrearing outcomes became conceptualized seen as a public duty, producing 'good stock' for the future benefit of the country.

Churchill and Clarke (2009) point out that a belief that parenting practices can solve problems such as social exclusion is a common recurring and increasing feature of UK policy. Initiatives such as SureStart and the Children's Centres have, from the beginning, focussed specifically on 'at risk' parents, and coupled services for children with initiatives designed to influence the behaviour of parents, such as breastfeeding and smoking cessation. The emphasis on Children's Centres influencing how parents interact with, talk to or play

with their children comes from this context. Working across our analysis of government policy rhetoric and anthropological literature, we are aware of the ways in which government policies frame the interactions Children's Centres have with families (Clarke, 2006), as well as the history of political ideology behind some of these framings (Gillies, 2007).

Our own experiences of using Children's Centres concur with this wider literature; such organisations offer valuable support to families and children, but through tightly framed models of what good parenting and childhood look like, which tend to limit the scope for parents to feel a sense of autonomy or expertise in their own parenting practices. For example, a notable characteristic of visiting playgroups run by Children's Centers (in our experience) is that staff emphasise interaction between parents and children. We each have personal experience of this; for example, we remember a display on the wall of a playgroup we used to attend, explicitly telling parents to read to their children, play on the floor with them and talk one to one with them for a certain amount of minutes each day. When children played at the playgroup, parents were encouraged to play with them on the floor, rather than sit on chairs at the side of the room. Periodically, the chairs around the edge of the room in which the playgroup took place would be turned towards the wall to discourage sitting down. Once, a parent fell asleep on the sofa during playgroup; staff regarded this as a failing in their mission to promote parent / child interaction, and the sofa was removed from the room.

But what is it really like to spend 24 hours a day with a small child, and as part of that day, to attend a playgroup and be so tired that you fall asleep on a sofa? Stadlen (2005) would argue that we lack the vocabulary to even begin to answer this question, and this is at the root of the problem with how parenting young children is conceptualized in society. Perhaps more collaborative research with parents will help us find more language to talk about how this crushing kind of tiredness, which can build up over months or years, feels. Or language to explain the constant sense of distraction that comes with keeping children safe in public places, or the overwhelming sense of both powerlessness and intense responsibility one can feel watching a child grow seemingly increasingly independent of you, whilst still being entirely dependent. In addition, we would add that some of the answers to '*what is it really like to parent a small child?*' cannot be articulated in words. This is something we came to appreciate through doing research on this project whilst also having young children ourselves. The ache through your arms from pushing a pushchair up a hill. The automatic jutting of a hip to support a small child in your arms. The constant slight tension of adrenaline

and flickering eye balls that comes from keeping an eye of your child playing in the sand pit whilst maintaining friendly conversation with other grown ups. We can try to articulate these things in this chapter, but some aspects of experience can only be known from the inside (Ingold, 2013).

Viewed through the lens of enacting a policy of increasing parent / child interaction through engagement with the Children's Centre, we can see the rationale for removing the sofa from the playgroup. Viewed through our own lived experiences of parenting, involving a combination of years of broken nights, co-sleeping, night time feeding and soothing, sleepless nights with sick children and staying up late to complete household chores, work and study once children are in bed: the act of removing the sofa seems almost brutal.

We write this analysis of the sofa hesitantly, because it is not intended as a criticism of one particular decision. Rather, we contrast the logic of the decision from the point of view of enacting a policy (intended to benefit families and improve children's life chances) with the illogical nature of the decision from the point of view of lived experiences of parenting, in order to powerfully introduce the two competing lenses we worked across as parents and researchers in this study. This disjuncture mirrors two visions for thinking about how children communicate and participate with their parents and wider communities; one is instrumental, tidy, measured and owned by policy discourses. The other is messier, more chaotic, and yet, to us, more real.

Re-thinking what parents know and do: sitting in the park

Towards the end of our research project, the four of us met in Clifton Park sandpit to talk about the project. Our children played together in the sand, whilst we sat, toes buried in the sand, talking. This mirrored the play that took place around the cardboard dens; play between children whilst adults sat back, characterized by moving bodies, interactions with place and materials, and children's non-verbal absorption in what they were doing.

We talked about how comfortable we felt allowing our children to play in this way, and how artificial intensive play interactions between adults and children can sometimes feel. We talked about our belief that when children get bored, it can fuel their creativity. We talked about the importance of letting go of the need to control and understand the rationale behind

what children do (Rautio, 2014). We talked about multiplicity; everyone has different ideas about how to raise children and, by doing something different, it is important parents do not feel they are doing something wrong (Stadlen, 2005). We talked about adult fear and anxiety; fear that children will get bored leads you to over plan (both as parents and practitioners - during our planning of the den building activities, we felt we were constantly resisting an urge to over plan). Related to this is adults' fear that only by increasing policy interventions and intensification of parenting (Gillies, 2007) can the proper development of young children be guaranteed.

These notions of fear and risk regarding children's development are pertinent to the discourse that shaped the children's play in the dens and at the craft tables during our study. As Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik (in Avineri et al, 2015: 73) have argued, advice given to parents on how to talk to and spend time with their children, "rests upon a class-based and anxiety-filled vernacular notion of the child as a communicative (cognitive developmental) project." Clarke (2006) points out that policies calling for an intensification of parenting risk parenting being seen as purely "an activity whose purpose is to deliver children with the desired characteristics." (P.717). Sitting in the park with our children, we talked about the need for more realistic views of what relationships between parents and children look like, and the need for broader parameters within which parents could be judged as fulfilling their role in a reasonable way.

Through doing this research, as both parents and researchers, and drawing on both these ways of knowing in our thinking and analysis, we felt able to make sense of our own lived experiences of parenting in new ways. Specifically, we viewed our personal embodied experiences of both parenting and using Children's Centres through the policy and dominant research framings within which these things operate.

Who has the expertise on our children?

Motherly achievements often go unseen. If there aren't words for them, how can we recognise them?

Stadlen, 2005, p.17

We wanted to articulate the ideas in this chapter, not to critique parents or practitioners, but to argue for the importance of de-centering official or academic expertise, particular regarding a topic as personal, intimate and idiosyncratic as young children and parenting, and instead foreground lived, experiential knowledge of parents themselves. When this happens, the juxtapositions between inflexible official advice and recommendations, and the subjectivity and multiplicity of parenting experiences, shows up in sharp relief. We want to articulate this because,

Loads of parents are thinking and knowing this, and having this experience, but when they get into schools, there is no way of them saying this, they are made to feel like bad parents. So if not through research, how else can this be recognised?

Steve, group discussion Oct 2014

Researchers in the field of childhood are asked to provide knowledge in writing about what is best for young children and recommendations for parenting which can be generalised and universally applied. As parents using Children's Centres, we are aware of the alienating effect such rigid and objective forms of knowledge can create.

That is so true – when we first came to the Children's Centre you are made to feel like you should listen to the professionals. But through this research, you realise that you are the expert, you know your own children.

Jo, group discussion Oct 2014

As parents, we draw on our lived experience of parenting, which is inherently subjective, flawed, contradictory and inconsistent, to say that relationships between parents and children take lots of different forms. *As a result, we are firstly calling for a more authentic, complex, nuanced account of what it means to parent young children.* Collaborative ethnography with parents offers the potential, we argue, for developing research methods that not only foreground lived experiential knowledge of parenting, but to make them indivisible from research observations. *Secondly, we are asking for this more nuanced and realistic account to inform early years policy with regards to supporting parents and families.* We call for these things because when policies to support families and children take the lived experience of

parenting as a starting point, and consider deeply what is possible, realistic, authentic or even desirable regarding the ways in which young children and the grownups who love them muddle through life together, interventions to support parents and families could be genuinely supportive and non-pathologising to all families.

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